

Ars Poetica – The Art of Poetry or Epistle to the Pisos

AP:1-37 On unity and harmony

If a painter had chosen to set a human head
On a horse's neck, covered a melding of limbs,
Everywhere, with multi-coloured plumage, so
That what was a lovely woman, at the top,
Ended repulsively in the tail of a black fish:
Asked to a viewing, could you stifle laughter, my friends?
Believe me, a book would be like such a picture,
Dear Pisos, if it's idle fancies were so conceived
That neither its head nor foot could be related
To a unified form. 'But painters and poets
Have always shared the right to dare anything.'
I know it: I claim that licence, and grant it in turn:
But not so the wild and tame should ever mate,
Or snakes couple with birds, or lambs with tigers.
Weighty openings and grand declarations often
Have one or two purple patches tacked on, that gleam
Far and wide, when Diana's grove and her altar,
The winding stream hastening through lovely fields,
Or the river Rhine, or the rainbow's being described.
There's no place for them here. Perhaps you know how
To draw a cypress tree: so what, if you've been given
Money to paint a sailor plunging from a shipwreck
In despair? It started out as a wine-jar: then why,
As the wheel turns round does it end up a pitcher?
In short let it be what you wish, but whole and natural.
Most poets (dear sir, and you sons worthy of your sire),
Are beguiled by accepted form. I try to be brief
And become obscure: aiming at smoothness I fail
In strength and spirit: claiming grandeur *he's* turgid:
Too cautious, fearing the blast, *he* crawls on the ground:
But the man who wants to distort something unnaturally
Paints a dolphin among the trees, a boar in the waves.
Avoiding faults leads to error, if art is lacking.
The humblest craftsman, down by Aemilius' School,
Who moulds finger-nails in bronze, imitates wavy hair,
Is unhappy with the result, because he's unable

To create a whole. Now if I wished to cast something,
I'd no more wish to be him, than live with a crooked
Nose, though admired for my jet-black eyes and black hair.

AP:38-72 The writer's aims

You who write, choose a subject that's matched by
Your powers, consider deeply what your shoulders
Can and cannot bear. Whoever chooses rightly
Eloquence, and clear construction, won't fail him.
Charm and excellence in construction, if I'm right,
Is to say here and now, what's to be said here and now,
Retaining, and omitting, much, for the present.
Moreover as the author of the promised work,
Liking this, rejecting that, cautious and precise,
Weaving words together, you'll speak most happily,
When skilled juxtaposition renews a common word.
If you need to indicate abstruse things by novel terms,
It's your chance to invent ones the kilted Cethegi
Never heard: licence will be given you if wisely used:
Indeed, new-minted words will gain acceptance
That spring from the Greek fount, and are sparingly used.
Why should Romans deny to Virgil and Varius
What they allowed to **Caecilius** and **Plautus**?
And why begrudge me adding a few if I can,
When Cato's and **Ennius**' speech revealed new terms,
Enriched our mother-tongue,? It's been our right, ever
Will be our right, to issue words that are fresh-stamped.
As the forests shed their leaves, as the year declines,
And the oldest fall, so perish those former generations
Of words, while the latest, like infants, are born and thrive.
We're destined for death, we and ours: no matter if
Neptune, harboured inshore, guards our ships from northerlies,
A royal project, no matter if an old barren marsh, that knew
The oar, feels the plough's weight, and feeds the towns nearby,
Or that a river which ruined crops has changed its course,
And learnt better ways: our mortal works will vanish,
The beauty and charm of speech no more like to live.
Many words that are now unused will be rekindled,
Many fade now well-regarded, if Usage wills it so,
To whom the laws, rules, and control of language belong.

AP:73-118 What the tradition dictates

Homer's shown the metre in which the deeds of captains
And kings, and the sorrows of war, may be written.
First, lament was captured in elegiac couplets,
Then, expressions of thanks for prayers granted, too:
Scholars dispute, though without final agreement,
As to who first composed short elegies in this metre.
Anger armed Archilochus with his own *iambus*:
His foot fitted both comic sock and tragic buskin,
Suited to dialogue, able to overcome the noise
Of the pit, and naturally appropriate to action.
The Muse granted the lyre tales of gods, and their sons,
Of the victor in boxing, the winning horse in the race,
The sorrows of youth, and the freedoms of wine.
How can I be called a poet if I ignore, or fail to observe,
The established functions and styles in my work?
Why from diffidence would I prefer not to know,
Than to learn? Comedy can't be played in tragic mode.
Likewise Thyestes' feast scorns being related
In everyday terms suited to the comic sock.
Let each thing keep to the proper place, allotted.
Yet Comedy may sometimes elevate its voice,
When an angry Chremes storms in swelling phrase:
And often in tragedy, Peleus and Telephus,
One exiled, one a beggar, lament in common prose,
Eschewing bombast, and sesquipedalian words,
When they want their moaning to touch the listener's heart.
It's not enough for poems to have beauty: they must have
Charm, leading their hearer's heart wherever they wish.
As the human face smiles at a smile, so it echoes
Those who weep: if you want to move me to tears
You must first grieve yourself: then Peleus or Telephus
Your troubles might pain me: speak inappropriately
And I'll laugh or fall asleep. Sad words suit a face
Full of sorrow, threats fit the face full of anger,
Jests suit the playful, serious speech the solemn.
Nature first alters us within, to respond to each
Situation: brings delight or goads us to anger,
Or weighs us to the ground, tormented by grief:

Then, with tongue interpreting, shows heart's emotion.
If the speaker's words don't harmonise with his state,
The Romans will bellow with laughter, knights and all.
Much depends on whether a god or man is speaking,
A mature old man, or one still flush with first youth,
A powerful lady, or perhaps a diligent nurse,
A wandering merchant, or tiller of fertile fields,
Colchian or Assyrian, from Argos or Thebes.

AP:119-152 Be consistent if you are original

Either follow tradition, or invent consistently.
If you happen to portray Achilles, honoured,
Pen him as energetic, irascible, ruthless,
Fierce, above the law, never downing weapons.
Make Medea wild, untameable, Ino tearful,
Ixion treacherous, Io wandering, Orestes sad.
If you're staging something untried, and dare
To attempt fresh characters, keep them as first
Introduced, from start to end self-consistent.
It's hard to make the universal specific:
It's better to weave a play from the poem of Troy,
Than be first to offer something unknown, unsung.
You'll win private rights to public themes, if you
Don't keep slowly circling the broad beaten track,
Or, pedantic translator, render them word for word,
Or following an idea, leap like the goat into the well
From which shame, or the work's logic, denies escape.
And don't start like the old writer of epic cycles:
'Of Priam's fate I'll sing, and the greatest of Wars.'
What could he produce to match his opening promise?
Mountains will labour: what's born? A ridiculous mouse!
How much better the man who doesn't struggle, ineptly:
'Tell me, Muse, of that man, who after the fall of Troy
Had sight of the manners and cities of many peoples.'
He intends not smoke from flame, but light from smoke,
So as then to reveal striking and marvellous things,
Antiphates, Charybdis and Scylla, the Cyclops.
He doesn't start Diomedes's return from Troy with his
Uncle Meleager's death, or the War with two eggs:
He always hastens the outcome, and snatches the reader

Into the midst of the action, as if all were known,
Leaves what he despairs of improving by handling,
Yet so deceptive, in blending fact with fiction,
The middle agrees with the start, the end with the middle.

AP:153-188 On characterisation

Hear now what I, and the public also, expect:
If you want us to stay in our seats till the curtain
Call, when the actor cries out 'All applaud',
You're to note the behaviour of every age-group,
Give grace to the variation in character and years.
The lad who can answer now, and set a firm foot
To the ground, likes to play with his peers, loses but
Quickly regains his temper, and alters with the hour.
The beardless youth, free of tutors at last, delights
In horse and hound, and the turf of the sunlit Campus,
He's wax malleable for sin, rude to his advisors,
Slow in making provision, lavish with money,
Spirited, passionate, and swift to change his whim.
Manhood's years and thoughts, with altering interests,
Seek wealth and friendship, devoted to preferment,
Wary of doing what they may soon labour to change.
Many troubles surround the aged man, because he
Seeks savings, yet sadly won't touch them, fears their use,
And because in all he does he's cold and timid,
Dilatory, short on hope, sluggish, greedy for life,
Surly, a moaner, given to praising the years when
He was a boy, chiding and criticising the young.
The advancing years bring many blessings with them,
Many, departing, they take away. So lest we chance
To assign youth's part to age, or a boy's to a man,
Always adopt what suits and belongs to a given age.
Events are either acted on stage, or reported.
The mind is stirred less vividly by what's heard
Than by what the eyes reliably report, all that
The spectator sees for himself. But don't reveal
On stage what should be hidden, keep things from sight
That eloquence can soon relate to us directly:
Folk shouldn't see Medea slaughter her children,
Impious Atreus mustn't openly cook human flesh,

Nor Procne turn into a bird, or Cadmus a snake.
Any such scenes you show me, I disbelieve, and hate.

AP:189-219 On the gods, chorus and music

No play should be longer or shorter than five acts,
If you hope that, once seen, it'll be requested, revived.
And no god should intervene unless there's a problem
That needs that solution, nor should a fourth person speak.
The Chorus should play an actor's part, energetically,
And not sing between the acts unless it advances,
And is also closely related to the plot.
It should favour the good, and give friendly advice,
Guide those who are angered, encourage those fearful
Of sinning: praise the humble table's food, sound laws
And justice, and peace with her wide-open gates:
It should hide secrets, and pray and entreat the gods
That the proud lose their luck, and the wretched regain it.
The flute, once, not bound with brass as now to rival
The trumpet, but simple and slender with few stops,
Was used to lead and support the Chorus, and to fill
The not over-crowded benches with its breath,
While the people gathered were few indeed, easily
Counted, and honest, and innocent, and modest.
Later when victory enlarged their territory,
Ringed their cities with wider walls, when placating
The Genius with daylight drinking went unpunished,
Then tempo and melody possessed greater freedom.
What taste could the illiterate show, freed from toil,
Where country mingled with city, noble with base?
The flute-player trailing his robe across the stage
Added interest and movement to an ancient art:
The range of the lyre, once so grave, was extended,
And an urgent delivery brought it new eloquence,
While the words, practical wisdom and prophecy,
Was not out of line with the Delphic oracles.

AP:220-250 On style

The man who once competed for a lowly he-goat
With tragic verse, soon stripped the wild Satyrs,

And tried coarse jests without loss of seriousness,
Since only the attractions and charms of novelty
Held the spectator, drunken and lawless, after the rites.
But to gain acceptance for cheeky, raucous Satyrs
You need to pass from serious mood to light,
Without the gods or heroes you've brought on stage
Whom we've just seen dressed in royal purple and gold,
Appearing in dingy taverns with vulgar language,
Or, scorning the ground, grasping at air and clouds.
Tragedy, to whom spouting low verse is unworthy,
Like a lady forced to dance at a festival,
Will join the insolent Satyrs with no small shame.
As a writer of Satyr plays, dear Pisos, I'd not
Embrace only tame and simple verbs and nouns,
Nor strain so hard to avoid the tragic style
Davus might as well be speaking, to shameless
Pythias who's just milked Simo of a talent,
As Silenus, guardian and servant of his god.
I'll pursue poetry made of what's known, so anyone
Could hope to do it, yet, trying it, sweat and toil
In vain: such is order and juxtaposition's power,
Such may its beauty crown the commonplace.
In my opinion, Fauns introduced from the woods
Shouldn't rattle out indiscreet erotic verses,
Or filthy and shameless jokes, almost as if they
Were born at the crossroads, or in the marketplace:
Some take offence, men with horses, ancestry, wealth,
Who don't take kindly to, or grace with a crown,
What the buyer of roasted nuts and chickpeas approves.

AP:251-274 On metre

A long syllable after a short is called an *iambus*.
A swift foot, therefore it ordered the name trimeter
To be associated with iambics making six beats,
First pair to last being alike. Not so long ago,
Obliging and tolerant, it received the solid
Spondee into the family inheritance, though not
Kind enough to cede fourth place, or sixth, in its ranks.
The *iambus* is rare in Accius' noble trimeters,
And it levels the shameful charge at the verses

Ennius trundled ponderously onto the stage
Of careless and hasty work, or ignorance of art.
Not every critic can detect unmusical verse,
So Roman poets have been granted unearned licence.
Should I run wild then, and write freely? Or, reflecting
That all will see my faults, play safe, still courting hope
Of pardon? At best I'd dodge censure, yet earn
No praise. As for yourselves, have Greek models
In your hands at night, and in your hands each day.
But your ancestors praised Plautus, metres and wit?
Too accepting and foolish, then, their admiration
Of both, if you and I can in any way distinguish
Unpolished from witty speech, and can mark
The correct measures with our ears and fingers.

AP:275-294 Greeks and Romans

Thespis, they say, discovered the Tragic Muse,
An unknown form, presenting his plays from carts,
Sung and acted by men, faces smeared with wine-lees.
Aeschylus, after him, introduced masks, fine robes,
Had a modest stage made of planks, and demanded
Sonorous speech, and the effort of wearing buskins.
Old Comedy came next, winning no little praise,
But its freedoms led to excess, to unruliness
Needing legal curb: the law was obeyed, the chorus,
Shamefully, fell silent, losing its rights of attack.
Our own poets have left nothing unexplored,
And have not won least honour by daring to leave
The paths of the Greeks and celebrate things at home,
Whether in Roman tragedies or domestic comedies.
And Latium would be no less supreme in letters
Than in courage and force of arms, if all her poets
Weren't deterred by revision's time and effort.
O scions of Numa, condemn that work that many
A day, and many erasures, have not corrected,
Improving it ten times over, smoothed to the touch.

AP:295-332 How to be a good poet

Because Democritus believed talent a greater

Blessing than poor old technique, and barred sane poets
 From Helicon, a good few don't care to trim their nails,
 Or beards, haunting secluded spots, shunning the baths.
 Surely a man will win the honour and name of poet
 If only he doesn't entrust Licinus the barber,
 With a noddle that three Anticyras couldn't affect!
 Ah, fool that I am, taking purges for madness each spring!
 Though no one composes better poetry: it's really
 Not worth it. Instead let me play the grindstone's role,
 That sharpens steel, but itself does none of the cutting:
 Writing nothing myself, I'll teach the office and function,
 Where to find resources, what feeds and forms the poet,
 What's right, what's not, where virtue and error lead.
 Wisdom's the source and fount of excellent writing.
 The works of the Socratics provide you with content,
 And when content's available words will quickly follow.
 Whoever knows what he owes his country and friends,
 What love is due to a parent, brother, or guest,
 What's required of a senator or a judge in office,
 What's the role of a general in war, he'll certainly
 Know how to represent each character fittingly.
 I'd advise one taught by imitation to take life,
 And real behaviour, for his examples, and extract
 Living speech. Often a play with fine bits, good roles,
 Though without beauty, substance or art, amuses
 The public more, and holds their attention better,
 Than verses without content, melodious nonsense.
 The Muse gave the Greeks talent, rounded eloquence
 In their speech, they were only greedy for glory.
 Roman lads learn long division, and how to split
 A pound weight into a hundred parts. 'Then, tell me
 Albinus' son, if I take an ounce from five-twelfths
 Of a pound, what fraction's left? You should know by now.'
 'A third.' 'Good! You'll look after your wealth.' Add an ounce,
 What then?' 'A half.' When this care for money, this rust
 Has stained the spirit, how can we hope to make poems
 Fit to be wiped with cedar-oil, stored in polished cypress?

AP:333-365 Combine instruction with pleasure

Poets wish to benefit or to please, or to speak

What is both enjoyable and helpful to living.
 When you give instruction, be brief, what's quickly
 Said the spirit grasps easily, faithfully retains:
 Everything superfluous flows out of a full mind.
 Fictions meant to amuse should be close to reality,
 So your play shouldn't ask for belief in whatever
 It chooses: no living child from the Lamia's full belly!
 The ranks of our elders drive out what lacks virtue,
 The Ramnes, the young knights, reject dry poetry:
 Who can blend usefulness and sweetness wins every
 Vote, at once delighting and teaching the reader.
 That's the book that earns the Sosii money, crosses
 The seas, and wins its author fame throughout the ages.
 There are faults of course that we willingly ignore:
 The string doesn't always sound as hand and mind wish,
 You call for a bass and quite often a treble replies:
 The arrow won't always strike the mark it's aimed at.
 Yet where there are many beauties in a poem,
 A few blots won't offend me, those carelessly spilt,
 Or that human frailty can scarcely help. So what?
 As a copyist has no excuse if he always
 Makes the same mistake, no matter how often he's told,
 As a harpist is mocked who always fluffs the one note:
 So to me one who often errs is a Choerilus,
 Whose one or two fine lines prompt startled smiles:
 And yet I'm displeased too when great Homer nods,
 Somnolence may steal over a long work it's true.
 Poetry's like painting: there are pictures that attract
 You more nearer to, and others from further away.
 This needs the shadows, that to be seen in the light,
 Not fearing the critic's sharp eye: this pleased once,
 That, though examined ten thousand times, still pleases.

AP:366-407 No mediocrity: recall the tradition!

O Piso's eldest son, though accustomed to virtue,
 By your father's voice, and wise yourself, take this
 Dictum to heart, the middling and just tolerable
 Is only properly allowed in certain fields. A lawyer,
 A mediocre pleader of causes, may fall short
 Of Messalla's eloquence, know less than Aulus

Cascellius, yet have value: but mediocrity
 In poets, no man, god or bookseller will accept.
 Just as a tuneless orchestra, a heavy perfume,
 Or poppy-seeds in tart Sardinian honey offend
 At a good dinner, the meal being fine without them:
 So a poem, born and created to pleasure the spirit,
 Sinks to the depths if it falls short of the heights.
 He who knows nothing of sport shuns the Campus' gear,
 Watches, if he's unskilled with ball, hoop, or quoit,
 Lest the ring of spectators burst out laughing freely:
 Yet he who knows nothing of verse still dares to write.
 Why not? He's freeborn and free, his total wealth's rated
 As that of a knight, and he's lacking in any defect.
 You at least will say and do nothing without Minerva,
 Such is your judgement and sense. Yet if you do ever
 Scribble, let it enter Tarpa the critic's ears,
 Your father's and my own, then put your manuscript
 Away till the ninth year: you can always destroy
 What you haven't published: once out there's no recall.
 While men still lived in the woods, Orpheus, the gods'
 Sacred medium, prevented bloodshed and vile customs,
 Hence it's said that he tamed tigers and raging lions.
 It's said too that Amphion, who built Thebes' citadel,
 Moved stones at the sound of his lyre, and set them
 Where he wished with its charmed entreaty. Once it was
 Wisdom to separate public and private, sacred
 And profane, to bar chance union, set marriage rights,
 Build towns, and inscribe the laws on pieces of wood.
 So divine bards and their poems achieved honour
 And fame. Following these, Homer was renowned,
 And Tyrtaeus whose verses inspired men's hearts
 To battle in war: oracles were uttered in song,
 The right way of living was shown, and royal favour
 Wooed with Pierian measures, and tunes invented,
 To help on tedious work: in case you're ashamed
 Of the Muse skilled with the lyre, or singing Apollo.

AP:408-437 Nature plus training: but see through flattery

Whether a praiseworthy poem is due to nature
 Or art is the question: I've never seen the benefit

Of study lacking a wealth of talent, or of untrained
 Ability: each needs the other's friendly assistance.
 He who's eager to reach the course's longed-for goal,
 Has done and suffered much as a lad, sweating, freezing,
 Abstaining from wine and women: the flautist who pipes
 At the Pythian Games, first learnt how: feared his master.
 Now it's enough to say: 'I compose marvellous poems:
 Let the itch take the last: I'll not be left behind ,
 Admitting I haven't a clue about something I never learnt.'
 Like an auctioneer drawing a crowd to the sale,
 So a poet whose rich in land, with large investments,
 Is bidding flatterers come to him, and profit.
 If he can serve up a really fine dinner too,
 Or go surety for a dodgy pauper, or save
 A dismal lawsuit's victim, I'd be amazed, if he,
 The lucky man, could tell false friend from true.
 You too, if you've given or mean to give someone
 A gift, don't induce him while filled with delight
 To listen to your verse: he'll cry: 'Lovely! Fine! Grand!'
 Now he'll grow pale, now he'll even force dew
 From his fond eyes, leap, and strike the ground.
 As those hired to mourn at funerals do and say
 Almost more than those who are grieving deeply,
 The hypocrite's more 'moved' than the true admirer.
 They say kings anxious to test someone, to see if
 He's worthy of friendship, urge on him many a glass,
 Ply him with wine: so, if you should fashion verses,
 Don't be deceived by the fox's hidden intent.

AP:438-476 Know your faults and keep your wits

If you ever read Quintilius anything, he'd say:
 'Oh do change this, and this.' If, after two or three
 Vain attempts, you could do no better, he'd order
 Deletion: 'return the ill-made verse to the anvil'.
 If you chose to defend your fault rather than change it,
 He'd spend not another word or useless effort
 To stop you loving you, and yours, unrivalled, alone.
 An honest, sensible man will condemn lifeless verse,
 Fault the harsh, smear the inelegant with a black
 Stroke of the pen, cut out pretentious adornment,

Force you to elucidate where it's not clear enough,
Denounce the ambiguous phrase, mark amendments,
Be an Aristarchus: not say: 'Why should I offend
A friend for a trifle?' Such trifles lead to serious
Trouble, once he's been laughed at, or badly received.
The sensible fear to touch, they flee, a crazy poet,
As when the evil itch, or jaundice, plagues someone,
Or fanatical delusions, or plain lunacy,
Diana's curse: children rashly follow and tease him.
He, inspired, goes wandering off, spouting his verses,
And if like a fowler intent on blackbirds, he falls
Into a well, or a pit, however much he cries:
'Help me, citizens!' none will bother to pull him out.
If anyone did choose to help, and let down a rope,
I'd say: 'Who knows if he didn't do that on purpose,
And doesn't want to be saved?' and I'll tell the tale
Of the Sicilian poet's death, how Empedocles
Keen to be an immortal god, coolly leapt into
Burning Etna. Grant poets the power and right to kill
Themselves: who saves one, against his will, murders him.
It's not his first time, nor, if he's rescued will he
Become human now, and stop craving fame in death.
It's not too clear why he keeps on making verses.
Has he desecrated ancestral ashes, disturbed
A sad spot struck by lightning, sacrilegiously? Yes,
He's mad: like a bear, that's broken the bars of its cage
The pest puts all to flight, learned or not, with reciting:
Whom he takes tight hold of, he grips, and reads to death,
A leech that never looses the skin, till gorged with blood.

End of the Ars Poetica